ON EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: EU-NATO-US COOPERATION IN AN ERA OF RENEWED GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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Abstract

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic singlehandedly awakened the entire planet as to the shortcomings of essentially every dimension of life on earth. Geopolitically, 2021 has also been marked by the Afghanistan withdrawal crisis brought upon by the untimely fall of the city of Kabul. One of the most important takeaways for the EU in the wake of these events, was the reality that the union falls short when it comes to a comprehensive, common crisis management strategy, strategic autonomy, integrated and resilient logistics mechanisms and even political unity. The initial reaction of most EU member states at the inception of the pandemic was complete lockdown, including closing territorial borders and halting exports, especially food and medical supplies. Post Afghanistan, EU member states are continuing their work on the Strategic Compass, the EU strategic autonomy process goes on.

The concept of EU strategic autonomy has very much been in fashion in EU circles, frequently used in political discourse, in academia and in the think tank

world. Reports are written and official declarations made, but is Europe really ready for strategic autonomy, can EU decision makers construct real consensus in Brussels as to what strategic autonomy means for the union? If there is strategic autonomy, independent from whom and what kind of ramifications would this have for the current security architecture in Europe, especially for NATO. These are questions the present article is looking to analyse. Essentially, what does EU strategic autonomy mean for EU-NATO-US cooperation in an era of renewed great power competition?

Keywords
EU geopolitics; Great power competition; NATO; NATO-EU Integration; strategic autonomy, strategic compass.

1. INTRODUCTION

European strategic autonomy in the age of renewed great power competition could be molded into a foundational building block of transatlantic defence and security architecture. The US needs and expects its allies to be credible defence partners, capable of providing security for their citizens on their own if necessary. On the other hand, a strong, autonomous EU means a European Union that is powerful in all aspects, not only economically or politically. That being said, strategic autonomy is not a static concept, it transforms in tandem with the threat environment as well as with the geopolitical landscape. In the EU, strategic autonomy started out as a debate about conventional security and defence, but the strategic autonomy process is fluid: defence is not only kinetic and the character of warfare evolved. The current strategic ecosystem needs conventional capabilities that can respond in all traditional domains, as much as it needs to be prepared to respond to digital attacks, attacks on the energy infrastructure, economic warfare and political subversion campaigns meant to destabilize the democratic framework for governance.

The present article takes a closer look at the concept of EU strategic autonomy. Firstly, it argues that the accelerated quest for strategic autonomy is best

explained by the tenants of structural realist theory, mainly, systemic shifts in the global system have prompted EU member states to seek a higher degree of strategic agency. Second, the paper presents a concise evaluation of key events in international relations that have contributed to the birth of the concept. Third, the article identifies key dimensions of EU strategic autonomy. The reasoning behind outlining these particular aspects versus any other is because these are directly correlated to how at global level systemic changes take place: the EU-US relations, nuclear capabilities and deterrence, NATO and the UN Security Council.

The present analysis is rooted in the neorealist paradigm, where nation states remain the main actor and in which states act driven by national interest and ultimately strive to preserve self help capabilities[1]. Because the international system is anarchical and there is no higher authority to protect states, they will ultimately seek to maximize power and capabilities, both military and economic. The EU is not a state, nor is it a federation of states; however, the article will show how pressure produced by the changing international system prompted the union to accelerate its quest for strategic autonomy. The paper focuses on the influence larger member states have in the debate and wether this has positive or negative effects on the strategic autonomy process. From a systemic point, the union's quest for strategic autonomy has started before the 2016 Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), however, it is difficult to challenge the fact that the Trump presidency effectively put this quest in overdrive. The paper asserts that this is in essence due to the neorealist belief that state behavior is primarily influenced by the structure of the international system, the EU is accelerating its quest for autonomy due to the current global geo strategic context in which she needs to gain more power so that the union can ultimately

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[1] See Mearsheimer John J.2007. "Structural Realism," in Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith.International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity. Oxford University Press Mearsheimer, John J.2001. The Tragedy of Great Power Politics. New York: W. W. Norton & Company Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. Theory of International Politics. Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company. Waltz, Kenneth N. 1959. Man, The State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis. Columbia University Press: New York

survive. Survival in this article means preserving EU values and protecting its interests, as well as defending the rules based order. The EU, the UN, NATO, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, free trade, these are all elements of the international order the EU alongside its allies and partners have a vested interest in preserving. President Trump often questioned NATO, he frequently talked about the dissolution of the alliance. Granted he was not the only state leader who questioned the raison d'être of the alliance, so did for instance French president Emanuel Macron, when he declared NATO essentially braindead, but coming from the White House such declarations cary a different meaning since the entire European security architecture still, over 70 years after the end of WW II, relies on the American guarantee and extended deterrence.

The paper proceeds in several stages: first there is ample time allotted to the semantics of the concept and the narrative around how it is framed in EU institutional discourse. The discussion on the semantics of the concept is followed by an analysis of the different contexts in which it was used and these are tied into the geopolitical greater context of the international system. Once the foundation of the discussion is laid, the second part of the paper conducts an analysis of the concept of EU strategic autonomy. The paper ends with conclusions and a definition extracted from these concussions.

2. EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY: SETTING THE STAGE

Strategic autonomy is now a buzzword in international relations and it polarizes political discourse in many European capitals. On the other side of the Atlantic, strategic autonomy is also cause for interest, not necessarily concern for Europeans pursing it but for Europeans misunderstanding or willingly avoiding to clearly define the meaning at least from Washington's perspective. Before exploring further, it is important to unpack the concept, the contexts in which it appeared and the narrative(s) that it is supposed to fulfill in the future.

2.1. Strategic Autonomy: The Semantics

The conceptualization of EU strategic autonomy is no easy task, moreover, to the complexity of the term itself, one has to add the fragile nature of current European political consensus over what it should embody, especially when it comes to matters of national security and European defence, the institutional discourse if you will. The irony in this not being lost since strategic autonomy was by excellence a security and defence concept, or maybe not so much irony as the essence of the debate. European Council president Charles Michel started his speech last September at the Bruegel think tank by confronting the possible controversy head on: "European strategic autonomy. Or sovereignty? Or power? We all know that concepts and words can take on different connotations depending on the context. Today I'd like to concentrate on the substance behind the words". (Michel 2020) EU strategic autonomy is the mission of this generation, but what is the substance?

In addition to political perspective, there is also the question of emphasis: which should be the nucleus, the strategic side of the concept or the autonomy? How should the two balance out? Furthermore, when we speak of autonomy, the question is from whom? The most likely candidate is the USA, and if that is at the core of the European discussion, how feasible is this autonomy given that we live in a highly interconnected world where dependencies have already been established, especially economic and technological ones. Finally, if it is indeed strategic autonomy from the USA, what kind of mid and long-term effects will it have for the transatlantic security architecture in general and for NATO in particular. Some EU decision makers emphasize, the autonomy element of the concept, and this poses a serious conceptual challenge because strategy can be without autonomy, but not the reverse. We cannot but assert that within the EU, some countries are more powerful than others, at least at the political/decisional level in Brussels, and, therefore, play a leading role in defining the concept for the majority. Under the strain of shifts in the structure of the international system, EU leadership is accepting the reality that they need to speed up the process of building a European defence capable to be a security provider on its own, but the complexity of the union, a conglomerate of sovereign nation states

poses a significant provocation. The ambiguity in defining the concept is best seen in the different views on strategic autonomy of France and Germany. Whereas France is a big supporter, Germany remains a cautious participant in the process. Naturally, the conclusion can be drawn that the conceptual uncertainty is willingly induced in order to allow the pursuit of more or less national/individual interests. Undoubtably, states like Germany and France will weigh more in the debate and this could very well be one of the weaknesses of the process. The paper is not looking to disseminate the roots of this aspect, but to outline how divergent opinions will impact the EU strategic autonomy debate overall and how different strategic cultures impact the agenda that is being pursued in negotiating the end outcome of EU strategic autonomy. It must be underscored that the way the article understands the influence of strategic cultures is their impact on defining, explicitly or implicitly, the national interest of individual Member States. For instance, as previously mentioned, Germany has a very restrained foreign policy and is in general reluctant to involve itself in armed conflict, however, it feels confident enough to pursue economic projects with strategic competitors like the Russian Federation.

Probably the most important as well as most challenging aspect of EU strategic autonomy is to establish what it actually means, what it is meant to achieve, and how that will take shape concretely, both politically, at the policy level, as well as operationally, in theaters. Another valid question would be: how will EU strategic autonomy be enforced? Key in this will be identifying and focusing on truly European values and interests, not individually driven, national priorities. The European Commission (EUC) rightfully identified this as a weakness in the EU geopolitical stand: "coordinated priority setting is still required to guide cooperation and commitment by Member States" (EUC 2021). Commonality and vision unity are the only way to realistically achieve the goal of an autonomous strategy. Sensible to conclude, however, quite challenging to achieve.

Semantically it is clear: the word "autonomy," according to the Oxford English Dictionary, denotes "self-government," "freedom of action" or "independence." In the EU context, autonomy is interchangeably used with sovereignty. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines sovereignty's core meaning as "supreme authority within a territory… a modern notion of political authority"

(Stanford 2003). The pivotal dimension of strategic autonomy is building consensus around the level of ambition of the EU: mainly, does the EU intend to be an entirely autonomous political entity fully responsible for providing security for its citizens on its own, or will strategic autonomy be limited to the military aspect, or will strategic autonomy be a cross sectoral total strategy? Another really significant dimension is constructing "a combined approach of current and forward-looking analysis" in order to "clarifying Europe's policy options" (EUC 2021). One thing is clear: autonomy is not a synonym for sovereignty. One applies to the way decisions are reached and strategy is built, the other is in essence the core of the nation state.

Strategic autonomy, the idea of a self-sufficient Europe in matters of defence, has been part of EU public discourse for a long time. It goes further back in time than the Lisbon Treaty or the Sant Malo declaration. Strategic autonomy has its origins in the field of security and defence. The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy was launched in the late 90s as an important step in the pursuit of "autonomy". The closest to a clear attempt to a definition is in the November 2016 Council conclusions: "capacity to act autonomously when and where necessary and with partners wherever possible" (Council of the EU 2016). In the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), agreed upon immediately after the Brexit referendum, strategic autonomy was included and later on defined by the Council of the European Union in the EU Implementation Plan on Security and Defence: strategic autonomy is the EU's ability to act in security and defence together with partners when it can, alone when it must (Council of the EU 2016). This particular moment in EU policy making marks a crossroad, one where the EUGS articulates interests that the document characterizes as vital to all Member States: "the security of EU citizens and territory, prosperity, democracy, and a rules based global order to contain power politics" (Biscop 2016). The EUGS identifies five priorities: the security of the EU itself, the EU neighborhood, crisis management, stable regional orders across the globe; and effective global governance.

Another version of strategic autonomy is presented by Executive Vice President of the Commission Margrethe Vestager as a drive for "open strategic autonomy" understood as a means to have the choice as to what kind of society the EU

wants to shape. Vice President Vestager uses the term open also in reference to the fact that the union has been able to make certain choices because of its prosperity, which in turn is a direct result of openness. This is all true, but it will need underlining that the freedom to choose and the ability to focus on the pursuit of economic prosperity and democracy were in a large part enabled by the American security guarantee. An entirely autonomous grand European strategy would mean full independence in strategic choices so that would in turn require an independent, integrated, capable, credible security and defence apparatus. "Open EU strategic autonomy" gained traction, and reappears in the September 2021 JRC Science for Policy Rep report: "Shaping & securing The EU's Open Strategic Autonomy by 2040 and beyond". The objective of the report according to the publishers is to present "the results of the foresight process carried out" on the future of strategic autonomy.

The construct of "defence sovereignty" also appears in the strategic autonomy language. The challenge is that without narrowing things down to an actionable core, one capable of producing a coherent policy framework, strategic autonomy risks becoming redundant, eventually loosing value.

Another definition comes form the European Parliament: "the ability to act autonomously as well as to choose when, in which area, and if, to act with like-minded partners. The capacity to act autonomously implies both the ability to decide and to implement decisions in an autonomous manner" (EPRS 2020). Ideally, EU strategic autonomy should be "the ability to act, preferably with others, beginning with NATO and the US, but when necessary also alone if Europe's allies and partners do not wish or may not be able to help" (Tocci 2019). Following the August 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, in an interview for Le Grand Continent, Council President Charles Michel, referred to "the idea of European strategic autonomy, which aims at strengthening our ability to influence in accordance with our interests and values while also placing emphasis on our ability to act". The word influence appears several times in his interview, drawing a picture of a union looking to advance its interests through soft power rather than of an EU looking to lead with military hard power. Regardless of means, this is a confirmation that the EU has great power aspirations.

The complexity of the EU strategic autonomy process stems in large part from the fact that in spite of being agreed upon EU language at a discourse level, not all member states understand it in the same way or want it to build the same framework for policy. Moreover, not all EU member states agree on what sectors it should be extended to. The Achilles heel of the EU is security and defence because it is very dependent on NATO and the US, therefore, some countries view strategic autonomy as an opportunity to take more solid steps toward an EU defence effort, while others agree with this but simultaneously fear that pursing autonomy would estrange Washington, weaken NATO and inherently weaken European security. The article argues that if managed pragmatically and in the true multilateral spirit of the union, European strategic autonomy will neither weaken NATO, nor estrange the US. In its European Global Strategy (EUGS), the union called for an ultimate goal of "strategic autonomy" and it simultaneously emphasized the need to "deepen" the EU's "partnership" with NATO (European External Action Service 2016). Undoubtably, a strategically autonomous EU would affect NATO both directly as well as indirectly, nevertheless, the execution will determine wether it will be negatively or positively.

Concrete steps were taken towards the goal: an important initial step was made when the concept of a European Defense Union emerged, then a Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC – the new acronym for what used to be called the Operational Headquarters (OHQ); the European Defense Fund was launched, the idea of Battle-Groups was presented and in June 2017 an agreement was reached at the European Council to operationalize PESCO. Unfortunately the Battle Group framework failed to produce concrete outcomes. This is in part due to the overall vague definition of the concept.

2.2 Strategic Autonomy: The Geopolitical Context

The next natural step in conceptualizing EU strategic autonomy is a succinct analysis of the context in which the concept appeared in EU political lexicon. "European strategic autonomy" clearly appears in EU official documents via the

European Union's Global Strategy of June 2016. We have established to evolution of the semantics, now it is warranted to extract key points from the geopolitical timeline.

The bipolar world order of the Cold War was a very well delineated geopolitical space. The two superpowers, the USSR and the USA were the de facto leaders of the international system and of their respective world orders. National interests of states were essentially aligned to either East or West. Once the Berlin Wall fell, the bipolar older started its metamorphosis into a multipolar one. The structure of the international system was undergoing deep alterations. July 1991 marked the end of the Warsaw Pact and this opened the door to NATO enlargement. The alliance entered a period of expansion. In parallel, former members of the Eastern Block embarked on the political journey of democratization and the economic journey of privatization. Everything went relatively smoothly for the EU while the US had its unipolar moment and some even predicted the end of history (Fukuyama 1989). Major turning points were the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US and the 2003 military intervention in Iraq. Until the 2003 Iraq mission, the transatlantic community acted in concert, no major rift was visible, nevertheless, Iraq was a major departure from political cohesion in European American relations. The 2003 Iraq War marked an inflection point in German–American relations: Germany did not support a military intervention. A bold strategic decision made by Berlin, one with long term implications for European strategic posture. In the moment it might not have looked that way, but over the years it became more and more apparent that Germany, the European economic powerhouse was creating a path of its own in international relations, one not articulated by official documents but expressed in political decisions such as the War in Iraq or strategic decisions such as a pipeline project with a revisionist power, against the majority transatlantic position.

Another consequential step was the French decision to rejoin NATO military structures in 2009. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, the Bush era was coming to an end and President Barack Obama was entering the White House. France's return to NATO's integrated military structures was driven by two main objectives: "on the one hand, to increase our presence and influence in

the Alliance; on the other hand, to facilitate the strengthening of the Europe of defence by removing any ambiguity about possible competition between the two organizations" (Permanent Representation of France to NATO). The French position was motivated by two sound strategic arguments: one national and one European.

European security defence debate was starting to take shape: Berlin, obviously ready to make bolder decisions, however still very restrained in discourse and official documents, Paris, anxious for more strategic independence from the senior defence partner, the US. This eagerness is very visible today as well: "We cannot blindly entrust what Europe represents, on the other side of the Atlantic or on the edges of Asia" (Macron 2017). So is the German restraint. In a way, President Macron's vision is an echo across time of President Eisenhower's viewpoint in 1951, when upon taking command of NATO, he declared: "If in ten years, all American troops stationed in Europe for national defense purposes have not been returned to the United States, then this whole project will have failed." American troops remained in Europe much longer than the ten years, to this day, those troops represent the core of EU defence.

Across the Atlantic, President Obama was also bringing in change. Part of the change was formally holding allies more financially accountable and "doing their part" in defence. It was President Obama who initiated the 2% pledge, the 2% guideline meant to aid in meeting NATO capability targets and filling NATO's capability shortfalls (NATO 2021). The Obama administration, just like the incumbent, favored multilateralism and believed that the world is better off in dealing with challenges together rather than alone. Both President Obama and President Biden value alliances, strategic partnerships, consultation, multilateralism and diplomacy. A strong, self-sufficient Europe was desirable to the Obama White House, especially since the US was starting to reposition strategic focus on to Asia. This perspective was put in overdrive by the election of President Donald Trump. President Trump was a one term president who managed to shake the international systems perceptions to the core. Although not entirely responsible for the European strategic autonomy push, president Trump certainly added a lot of fuel to the fire. It was in fact in response to the US's withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty signed in

1987 that French President Emmanuel Macron called for a European Army to defend against all potential enemies, including the USA if need be. Strong language from Paris, pointing to the uncertainty Europe was feeling about the US as a predictable, reliable security partner/provider. Once the United Kingdom referendum results put the UK on its own path again vis-à-vis the EU, the conversation became clear: the Union has no option but to come to some sort of consensus on autonomy. President Michel concisely summed up the reality that European quest for more strategic autonomy is not the result of one particular event, but the sum of different geopolitical realities: "on a geopolitical level, we have noticed in the past few years that there are differences when it comes to interests or how to achieve objectives."(Michel 2021). The reality on the ground is that within the EU, some states are more geopolitically aligned with the US than other states. Nevertheless, most EU Member States are in favor of a more capable, operationally integrated EU.

Geopolitically, 2020 was a year marked by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic and 2021 will most likely be remembered as the year of the Afghan withdrawal crisis. Both confirm the urgency of a more autonomous Europe and both are still unraveling. They will have lasting effects on the international system and global geopolitical dynamics for decades to come.

Threats today are not only many in number but also complex in nature. The EU, the geopolitical actor, has to ensure security for its citizens, secure the EU periphery, effectively manage the migration crisis, navigate the pandemic and as much as possible defuse its negative effects on the population, healthcare systems and the economy, address climate change and fight terrorism, piracy and human trafficking, all in an interconnected environment where some state and non-state actors use technology and information as a weapon. Most importantly, it is the union's vital interest to develop the credible defence strategy and operationalize it. Finally, it is part of that vital interest to maintain a close relationship with the US and to not define autonomy in a divergent way as related to the Americans.

3. ON EU STRATEGIC AUTONOMY

The main arguments of the article are looking to analyze the mutual effects of EU strategic autonomy on NATO and on the EU-US relationship. Why? Mainly because NATO and the American guarantee are the bedrock of European security. Pursuing strategic autonomy in itself is not the catalyst of changes in these dynamics, however, and this is a very big however, how the EU strategic autonomy process is negotiated and morphed into actionable policy will have either a negative or positive impact on NATO and the transatlantic relationship.

3.1. EU Strategic Autonomy, the Transatlantic Relationship and NATO

The European strategic autonomy process was more or less a long time in the making. The structure of the international system is transitioning to a new paradigm, at the center is renewed great power competition and this will influence all power dynamic in the international system, regardless of geographic location. The return to great power competition means the system is heavily impacted by the patterns of interaction between the great powers, the distribution of both military and economic capabilities. The return to great power competition also challenges the European model of conflict management and post-conflict stabilization: if US resources are being deployed elsewhere, Europeans have to step in and fill the vacuum. This replacement will naturally have to be translated into an accordingly adjusted normative framework of defence planning at all levels: strategic, operational and tactical. Finally, there is a multifaceted, interstate logistics/infrastructure dimension.

Post WWII there was containment and countering the Soviet Union and its allies while preventing communist ideology from spreading across the world map. Once the 9/11 attacks took place, counterterrorism became the American priority. At present, the US is in the midst of strategic competition with China and to some extent Russia. The United States has concluded "the costs of accepting China's own national interest and ideology outweigh the benefits of cooperation" (Herd 2020). The 2018 US National Security Strategy announced

the era of great power competition. It is in this international geopolitical decorum that the EU is looking to find the substance behind the concept of strategic autonomy and, implicitly, strengthen the European pillar of security and defence. This is a complex aspect of the strategic autonomy discussion because the European Union is, by nature of her makeup, a great power paradox: on one hand politically and economically a great power, on the other hand, security dependent on NATO and the US. Therefore, it makes sense to conclude that from a security standpoint, the most important angle in the EU - US relationship is NATO and the Article 5 guarantee. The epicenter of European security is Article 5 of the Washington Treaty:

> *"an armed attack against one [of the allies]... shall be considered an attack against them all and ... if such an armed attack occurs, each of them ... will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area".*

(Washington Treaty of 1949, NATO 2021)

Great power competition, 21st century Realpolitik if you will, is about power, influence, capabilities, strategic interests, facts and pragmatism. One fact is that the transatlantic relationship is moving towards deeper security codependence. The relationship is moving towards codependence in the defence realm because the US alone can no longer be the sole keeper of European security, this is not feasible. This is new, because great power competition is pivoted in Asia, for the first time in modern history, the core of the international system is no longer Europe, and both contenders are also, not European powers. Furthermore, Europe has changed. We function in a world unlike the one of Secretary of State's Madeleine Albright's discourse about the "three Ds" of NATO, "which is no diminution of NATO, no discrimination and no duplication". Even back then, the US supported a self-sufficient Europe. During the same address, when voicing the American position vis-à-vis the Franco British St Malo declaration, Secretary Albright declared: "It is a manner by which the Europeans can share in the work of NATO. It is something that cannot hurt NATO because this is the

most important alliance. But we think it is very important that the Europeans work in this manner because it is something that helps us in burden sharing". She went on to remind the audience: "For it was in 1947, a half century ago, that America made its fateful decision, in the aftermath of war, to remain a European power" (NATO 2008). Complementarity of NATO and EU, deeper integration, increased interoperability and mobility of troops and equipment would strengthen American position globally as well as European regional security. Caveat to this statement is that the EU member states construct autonomy through internal consensus, not through national interests. Consensus is needed, not an informed majority. The principle of unanimity, where all twenty-seven members agree, is the major tenant of strategic autonomy because we are dealing with security and defence. All states have the same right to decide on their safety, in realist terms, on their survival.

The discussion about US reliability is not really warranted. The US is and will remain a European power because this is how the WWII world order was constructed and only this way can peace be maintained on the old continent, EU and the US together. The US could theoretically withdraw from the Washington Treaty, but this would not at all be in its national interest. A misconception that keeps being promoted by some voices is that the US is abandoning Europe in favor of strategic competition in Asia. We must not forget that NATO is still in existence and that the alliance was built with this goal in mind: collective defence of the transatlantic space, support for Europe to become a self-sufficient defence actor. The US has conceived a security architecture in post WWII Western Europe, it has extended it after the end of the Cold War and now the EU is economically and politically strong, therefore fully capable to focus more on its own defence, especially at the periphery. Adversaries know that the US is committed to Article 5. What will shape the structure of the system going forward and inherently influence state behavior is a rapidly evolving threat environment and how system independent threats such as pandemics and climate change are becoming more and more prevalent. EU-NATO cooperation, as Allied leaders underlined in the London declaration of December 2019, has to be complementary, member states need to continue adapting "military capabilities, strategy, and plans across the Alliance in line with our 360-degree

approach to security" (NATO 2019). EU-NATO-US synergy is also an EU strategic autonomy pillar. US commitment should not really be doubted, there is no evidence to support such position. The alliance is preparing to work on a new strategic concept and simultaneously, the union is working on the strategic compass, and how synergic these two will be, will determine much of the European strategic power in both the medium and long term. The most sensible path would be for the EU to consolidate capabilities and interoperability within the NATO framework in order to protect the union and to engage the periphery and areas of geo strategic interest to the union on its own, most likely as standalone EU missions. It worked in the past, when under the pressure of a crisis where the US no longer signaled a desire to engage as much, the EU took over with a European Union military operation in support of humanitarian assistance in response to the crisis situation in Libya (EUFOR Libya). Another example is the European Union Training Mission in Mali. It also did not work during the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Why did it not work in Afghanistan is in fact a very good question to take back to Brussels. Professor Mary Kaldor discusses this aspect and ties it back into the declared EU quest for autonomy from the senior partner: "Ever since the EU approved its Global Strategy in 2016, it has been building an autonomous defence capacity. It is unconvincing to argue that this industrial giant is really not capable of providing logistical support for some 10,000 troops or indeed of replacing the logistical support provided to Afghan security forces, especially if counterterrorism military operations had been ended" (Kaldor 2021). A valid question indeed, if there ever was one. Unfortunately, the obvious answer remains the lack of political will from major EU states. From a strategic point of view, based on previous experience, it will be very challenging to change EU strategic mindset from a crisis intervention mode to a proactive, defence posture. This is where Brussels will need to do a lot of work on gaging the level of ambition, yes, but also to be realistic about what the limits of the EU are. Most obvious limitation is the legal framework which prevents the EU from acting on behalf of the Member States. Still, both the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon and NATO offer plenty opportunities for cooperation. The other limitation is the very low political will of some Member States.

The next aspect of the transatlantic relationship in the context of EU strategic autonomy is how the EU engages the US and which general perception/discourse will prevail. On one side, there is vocal France and at the other end of the spectrum are former countries of the Eastern Block like Romania or Poland where Washington is revered as the senior security partner. President Michel declared vis-à-vis the transatlantic relation: "we cannot ignore an increasing number of geopolitical choices that run contrary to Europe's interests" but does this really resonate with all EU Member States? For example: some states want to remain neutral in the competition between China and the US. This will not be possible for a very long time, at some point a strategic choice will need to be made. Strategic choice means: to factor in the structure of European defence, resources allocated to defence, willingness to deploy EU citizens in case of a conflict and the realization that some of those troops might get injured or pay the ultimate price. Strategic choice also entails factoring in the cost of being unprepared. These are the types of decisions that a great power needs to make. This is why consensus and not informed majority is mandatory in the EU strategic autonomy process. The push for removing the unanimity rule comes mainly from Germany, which is surprising, considering that Germany is one of the most, if not the most reluctant EU member to deploy troops or to invest in military capabilities. Nonetheless, there is a way to take charge if the situation warrants it. The consolidated version of the Treaty of the European Union reads: "Within the framework of the decisions adopted in accordance with Article 43, the Council may entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the capabilities needed to carry out such an operation". Key words are capabilities, which states must have and willing, which means political will at the national level.

Finally, there is the extended deterrence the US is offering all its NATO allies. Any versed adversary, and at this time the world order is being challenged by very versed adversaries, understands that if US interest decreases in the EU so will the risk-taking availability. The EU strategic autonomy process must include a discussion/strategic dialogue about nuclear deterrence if autonomy is a serious long-term objective. Propagating a Cold War narrative would be fundamentally flawed. We no longer live in an international system where two

superpowers are in control and therefore assure the strategic stability of the global community. At the same time, strategic stability is closely linked to nuclear deterrence. We are in the middle of systemic adjustments and one of the major adjustments is the status of the EU. Great power status comes with the nuclear component.

The transatlantic relationship in itself will be different. The US and the EU remain allies, however, the core of the relationship will need to transition and mature if the EU is indeed keen on strategic autonomy. Moreover, the EU will need to factor in that strategic autonomy is not about who the US president is but about the necessity to be capable to defend and deter in an era when the US pivoted its foreign policy to Asia. Once again, was it not about helping the Europeans to build themselves up to the point where they can defend themselves?

3.2 EU Strategic Compass: Establishing Strategic Direction

As previously established, the EU can only succeed in strategic autonomy as a cohesive conglomerate. Simply put in neorealist terms: individual states, even the powerhouses of the union, are not in a position to compete on their own in the current great power contest. Complacency, restraint or neutrality are not an option because the structure of the international system does not allow it. In the same Bruegel speech cited previously, President Michel confirmed that the union has aspirations of power: "Europe is a major player, but doesn't yet know that it is" (Michel 2020). The question remains which direction the EU wants to take and how to decide.

The central challenge to the materialization of EU strategic autonomy does not come from allies, partners or even competitors, but from within. The EU does not have a homogenous, common strategic culture. Strategic culture is rooted in political culture and political culture is a product of historical occurrences, geography and geopolitical developments. It is hard to imagine that Eastern European countries will ever let go of their strong partnership with the US and they cannot be blamed. Poland, Romania, the Baltic States, they all are directly

vulnerable to an assertive Russia and since the end of the Cold War it was the US in bilateral arrangements with these former Warsaw Pact member states or former Soviet Union republics that have ensured the de facto defence of the EU's eastern flank and strategic stability in Europe. Nonetheless, strategic culture alone cannot be used as an excuse to delay a more active participation, nor can it be built by checking boxes on a paper.

Under the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union the development of a Strategic Compass became a key goal with the hope that it will mitigate the lack of a common strategic culture and that it will lead to actionable recommendations. The Strategic Compass was conceived as a two-year process, led by the European External Action Service under the responsibility of the EU high Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It is expected to materialize as "the new security policy document" and it "must be based on a broad political consensus and a strong political will to act" (EU German Presidency Website 2020). Its declared aim is to assist the EU in defining "what kind of security and defence actor it wants to be". (EU External Action, 2020) As a first step to determine the direction of travel, the EU has conducted for the first time a comprehensive analysis of key threats and challenges to Europe, including: global and regional threats, conflicts in the EU neighborhood, challenges by state and non-state actors. The Strategic Compass will address different, inter-linked areas: crisis management missions, resilience, capabilities and instruments, working with partners. A target adoption date is March 2022, under the French Presidency.

It is general consensus that current security threats are posed by regional, global or transnational forces, but also by pathogens, resource scarcity and climate change. Only when threats to the EU are unanimously agreed upon by all members of the union can we speak about an actionable strategy, hence, a concrete step forward towards EU strategic autonomy. The Strategic Compass will hopefully identify threats and disseminate them from a regional vantage point. For example, the Black Sea is typically not central on the European defence agenda, however, as great power competition theater, the Black Sea represents the gateway to the greater commons for Russia. Just because the

Black Sea does not play the same role in EU merchant shipping like the Baltic, it does not mean that it is less important strategically.

A strategic priority which is far from resolve in the EU are nuclear arsenals. Nuclear weapons are the grand equalizer in the power discussion. At the core of Europe, the fourth largest world economy is most likely not going to be open to become a nuclear power. In this context, how will the EU build a nuclear strategy? A very sensitive matter and a very challenging question the union has to answer. So far, the European common security effort has been primarily focused on crisis management. While crisis management plays a pivotal role in preserving peace and stability, an autonomous actor needs to act multifold: in addition to crisis management, the EU will need to deter and defend and nuclear capabilities are a non-negotiable when it comes to deterrence. Nuclear weapons and conventional military capabilities are the strategic deterrent and once the UK left the union, France remained the only nuclear power. President Macron extended an invitation to all EU member states to engage in a strategic dialogue vis-à-vis nuclear weapons, however, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg refuted this in his speech at this years Munich Security Conference: "We have to remember that we have a European nuclear deterrent today -- 28 allies deliver that every day and it's not only a promise, but it's something that has been there for decades" (Stoltenberg 2021). This is a complex segment of the discussion. In great power competition, the players need to have the strategic deterrent so the EU must find a fusional way to answer this dilemma without focusing decision making in Paris or any other European capital. It will be challenging to reach the common strategic denominator and balance this with looking for "European input to fuel NATO strategic concepts" as French Minister of the Armed Forces formulated her country's expectation along with four clear objectives: to increase defense budgets, more interoperability and tighter cooperation in the defence industry, greater sovereignty for European missions, with a focus on fighting terrorism in Africa, and, fourthly, straightening European capability to act freely in contested spaces such as maritime, space and cyber (French Minister of the Armed Forces 2020). If we look at the mission to prevent the seizure of vessels in the Strait of Hormuz for instance, something that would have been perfectly aligned with the purpose of

the CSDP, there was no joint CSDP mission, but a coalition of the wiling under French leadership. The mission in the Strait of Hormuz occurred outside the institutional framework of either EU or NATO.   Again, political will and consensus are no easy task.

3.3 EU Strategic Autonomy: Balancing Economic Might and Defence Policy

When discussing strategy, establishing the ends is key. In terms of strategic autonomy, the EU has to clarify and communicate its geopolitical objectives, interests and priorities. It is known that the EU possesses a lot of regulatory and standard-setting power. An example of this is GDPR: although strictly EU regulation, essentially the entire world is complying. This is the Brussels effect. The Brussels effect, the theory put forth by Anu Bredford, reveals how the EU mastered a unique power to influence global corporations and set the rules of the game while acting alone (Bredford 2020). The Joint Research Centre (JRC), the European Commission's science and knowledge service, published a report in 2021 in which EU's regulatory and standard-setting power and EU's rules-based and multi-level governance model are both listed as strengths. The same report suggests that the EU bureaucracy "offers the right framework to advance Open Strategic Autonomy". The Commission defines open European strategic autonomy as a concept which "enables the EU to be stronger, both economically and geopolitically", by being open to trade and investment, "sustainable and responsible to lead internationally to shape a greener and fairer world, reinforcing existing alliances and engaging with a range of partners" and "assertive against unfair and coercive practices and ready to enforce its rights, while always favouring international cooperation to solve global problems". EU language is suggesting that the strategic autonomy process is starting to meander in a direction modeled after the already successful regulatory framework for trade. In accentuating the non-military dimension of strategic autonomy is the EU helping or hurting the strategic autonomy process? We cannot say for sure because there is no historical precedent and there are too many variables, however, based on the overarching structure of the system and

great power competition, it would be wise to incline towards a more pessimistic outcome, should the EU favor this approach. Why? First, defence and security are hard power, there is no way around this fact. Security, and here we mean security in the wider sense, comes from all other states in the system knowing that you, the EU, can defend yourself on your own and from having credibility. If the EU focuses on leading with commercial/political influence when constructing its strategic autonomy, without simultaneously building an integrated conventional defence framework, one to compliment NATO, then credibility will not be there. Looking at energy or cyber from an economic standpoint is not the same as looking at them from a security and defence standpoint. Security and the economic have to be seamlessly balanced in the EU strategic autonomy process. Information and technological innovations have been weaponized and are used by assertive powers in their quest for an advantage in great power competition. The strategic discussion has to be built around this reality. President Emanuel Macron emphasized how technology changes the structure of the international system itself: "the technological transition that is changing the way we look at the world, as we have seen again recently, which is completely shaking up the relationship between the inside, the outside and our representations of the world" (Macron 2020). Challenging to mediate these aspects, nevertheless, it must be done. The strategically autonomous EU must look at the issue in a symbiotic manner, and if it does so, it will succeed. A good illustration of this point is the defence industry. The US voiced "worries about a duplication of existing transatlantic military structures" (Kamp 2015), and this makes perfect sense because the US is spending financial and human resources on these transatlantic structures and it does so, first and foremost, in order to preserve peace and strategic stability in Europe. "Buy European" is not bad for the transatlantic security architecture, as long as the autonomy agenda is not anchored around it. Case in point: the interoperability initiative which produces the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) or Main Ground Combat System produces a military capability already in use by NATO allies. The process should objectively evaluate what good these new capabilities will bring if there is no clear vision of its overarching strategic priorities. Furthermore, defence industry initiatives might be better left for what the EU

does going forward, this way there will be no risk of duplication. Yes, it is good to have two good air combat systems to choose from, but how is this exactly going to add value to NATO now?

Also relevant is the 5G debate. It is fact by now that some actors employ cyber attacks, disruptive technologies, artificial intelligence and cyber espionage in what we refer to as great power competition. The 5G debate is an appropriate example of how autonomy is not limited to arms deals and treaties. How can the EU be autonomous when security depends on the American guarantee and technological development is channeled through foreign satellite networks and technologies? Strategic autonomy for Europe in the digital age could mean fostering more cooperation with the private sector, especially for R&D. How is Europe going to position itself in order to bolster defence capabilities when, once again, different states view the armed forces through their own individual strategic lens? And how is the military private sector cooperation going to move forward unhindered by national economic interests?

The good news is that the EU is having these conversations. The not so good news is that the EU has been having these conversations for a long time already, with no actionable result. Nevertheless, there are domains where the EU certainly is taking the lead and is doing so for benefit of the international community and international security. The domain is climate policy. The negative effects of global warming and climate change on both populations and the environment have been known to scientists for decades. The United Nations identified climate change as "the defining issue of our time" (UN 2020). Unfortunately, policy and political debate have lagged behind. Now, the time has finally come to have more involved conversations and the EU assumed a lead role.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The quest for EU strategic autonomy was accelerated by the COVID 19 pandemic but it existed before and it was the result of not just one crisis but several systemic crises: Brexit, the Trump presidency, the war in Ukraine, the

illegal annexation of Crimea, the rise of an assertive China, all have in one way or another contributed to the EU seeking more independence to act on its own in security and defence. It would be short sided to attribute this quest to only president Trump or Brexit. It would also be wrong to posit EU strategic autonomy as distancing from the US or competition with the US. The West as the transatlantic community is often referred to, is Europe and its allies and partners. But while the West has been able to develop technologies, grow economically, benefit from free trade and globalization, it seems that it is at times running the risk of taking security for granted.   Security is not a guaranteed aspect of the European way of life and talking about it or only reacting in a crisis like Libya in 2011 or Mali, is also not sustainable nor prudent. Defence requires clear planning which in turn leads to readiness and resilience. It costs resources, both human and material, first to obtain freedom, liberty and democracy and then to maintain and defend them. The Cold War ended but some ideologies seem to reemerge in different forms and with different grand strategies. WWII ended, yet nationalism, another malign ideology seems to be reemerging and is exploited at the expense of democracy and the rule of law. It is in the EU's vital interest to build a new European defence order able to assure stability, dialogue, and cooperation both internally as well as with allies and partners. Furthermore, it is just as essential to do this in concert and close consultation with the US. There is no other sensible way.   The US might realistically have to deploy more resources in Asia and this will affect the European defence structure. Europe has to build up preparedness, and to do it sooner rather than later because adversaries do not wait for the Europeans to build a joint strategic culture, nor will they abide to the same normative restraints if they don't have to. EU strategic autonomy could be applied in different frameworks: NATO, EU missions, coalitions of the willing, all it takes is to start with genuine political will and to define realistic, clear European strategic interests, while not confusing them with trade or commerce. Security comes first, without it there is no prosperity or freedom.

To encapsulate all points made in the paper, a definition of EU strategic autonomy must include three elements: first, the territorial security of the EU and deterrence provided by NATO under the US nuclear umbrella, second, the

EU must build up integrated defence capabilities that will be operational at the periphery of the EU or in areas that are of strategic interest to the union, and, thirdly, defence industry initiatives should be directed to the future, not be an effort to undo already established, interoperable components of the European defence architecture.

Finally, other conclusions of the article are that first, although wrapped in institutionalist discourse, European strategic autonomy is realpolitik driven by interest. The EU is speaking the language of power already, it is looking to play a role in great power competition and this is a good thing. Second, the quest for autonomy is not the product of one event or another, it is a natural reaction to the systemic changes that are taking place now and that have been taking place since the end of the Cold War. The question is not why the EU is seeking to be more self sufficient in the field of defence and security but how it can do it by strengthening its alliance with the US, UK and Canada in the NATO framework and with partners outside of alliance footprint. The US alone cannot defend the rules-based order, allies have to step up and show through action that they can be autonomous if necessary.

Another takeaway of the analysis is that EU strategic autonomy is a process not a single policy that Brussels can decide on. It took time to get here and it will take longer to see measurable progress. There are too many variables in this process, some cannot be anticipated, and COVID is the first thing that comes to mind when making this statement. Also, key is to accept that a successful process means positive outcomes for the transatlantic alliance not just a group of EU members. Consensus is the only way to achieve EU strategic autonomy, not informed majority.

The collective defence of the European continent is a NATO task and it will remain so even in the context of EU strategic autonomy. The Lisbon Treaty clearly spells this out. Nevertheless, an autonomous EU would be able to conduct operations meant to stabilize and manage crises in the EU neighborhood. In turn, this would consolidate the transatlantic security architecture and assure complementarity.

President Macron, often considered the champion of EU autonomy, concluded his landmark 2020 interview by underlining the necessity for Europeans "to

engage in this debate throughout Europe and build what is in our common interest and the strength of our proposals". He also pointed out that is no easy task: "But I think there is a world to be invented. We are already doing so, but we need to develop it more clearly" (Macron, 2020). Dialogue is important, actions and a framework for policy will need to follow, hopefully at the completion of the EU Strategic Compass. Still, we need to remember that a compass can only point to a direction. It remains up to the EU to choose direction. The strategic autonomy process is about strategy first and foremost, not only about military or economic capabilities and certainly not about who the allies are, we already know that. We have over 70 years of concrete evidence for who the allies are. At last, tactics certainly matter, but they usually are just a slow detraction if ends are not clearly defined. After all history has repeatedly testified that: "It is about the big picture because, after all: strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat". (Sun Tzu)

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